

BREAKING OUT

State's tallest point shrinks

But new overlook at Sassafras Mountain gives first long-distance scenic view

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As we age, we get shorter. It's a fact of life.

And generally, as mountains age, they get taller. Go figure.

While our bones and cartilage shrink and our spines curve, lessening our height, tectonic plates and the forces of nature shove mountains skyward. The world's tallest mountain — Mount Everest — for example, grows almost 2 inches every year.

So it comes as some surprise to learn that South Carolina's tallest mountain doesn't quite measure up to where it used to be, oh, say a few months ago.

For years, every schoolchild learned Sassafras is 3,560 feet tall, just like the Carolina wren is the state bird and kudzu is, um, the state pest.

It was written in stone. In the case of Sassafras, the state's tallest point wasn't exactly marked. Although there is a small U.S. Geological Survey marker atop the mountain, no one has ever been sure where the highest spot on the mountaintop was.

"We wanted to know where it was and, at the same time, know where the state line is," said Mark Hall, project manager for the Jocassee Gorges.

For years, visitors had clamored for a plaque to mark the state's high point. So, officials with the South



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A couple of hikers take a break on the new scenic overlook at Sassafras Mountain, South Carolina's highest point.

Carolina Department of Natural Resources enlisted the help of the South Carolina Geodetic Survey to find out.

As it turns out, Sassafras doesn't quite measure up to what it used to be. Or maybe more accurately, what people thought it used to be.

The measurement found that Sassafras Mountain is 3,553 feet tall, 7 feet shorter than previously presumed. Some of that height loss could be attributed to grading done when the summit was cleaned up and an old shack removed. The rest, Hall surmises, may be because of better equipment used to measure moun-

tains these days.

But there is good news about Sassafras. For years, when people reached the summit either by driving to a point near the top or by hiking up from several different trails, they were a bit underwhelmed by what they found.

And that was a look at native flora, but very little of an actual view. Hikers commonly would say the hike to the top was awesome, but the view nonexistent.

That's now changed. "I've been here 10 years," Hall said. "And we knew we wanted a better view from up there, but our hands were tied because we didn't know what North

Carolina was going to do with its side of the mountain.

"We knew it deserved a better view than it had."

Two things happened to change that, Hall said. About five years ago, Duke Energy sold the last of its holdings atop Sassafras, 2 acres at the top, to the state.

That allowed a parking lot to be built near the summit that can accommodate about 50 or 60 cars. It also allowed the cleanup atop the mountain.

The second thing that happened was two North Carolina foundations' purchase last summer of 8,000 acres of land from Charles Taylor, a former congress-

man from the state, including the north side of Sassafras Mountain. The foundations plan to put the land into public use.

Although future plans include "putting something very nice on top of the mountain," such as a visitor's center and observation tower, that plan has to wait on funding, Hall said.

In the meantime, Hall and his crew built an overlook off the parking lot just below the summit of Sassafras.

"It took us four days, and it cost less than \$3,000," Hall said about the construction project last fall. "It was our interim measure to get a view from Sassafras."

with age

HIKE THE MOUNTAIN

Getting to the top of Sassafras Mountain is easy. It's actually handicap-accessible if you're interested in a bit of a rough push up the last hundred feet or so.

■ For a more adventurous summit attempt, start at Table Rock State Park. It's a 9.5-mile hike following park trails and the Foothills Trail.

■ Or start at the Chimney-top Gap trailhead for the Foothills Trail on the F. Van Clayton Memorial Highway. This hike is about 2.6 miles to the top and is uphill most of the way.

■ Find a topographical map of the area at www.trailbehind.com/node/994435/. Or buy a copy of the Foothills Trail map at www.foothills-trail.org.



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The new overlook is a short walk from the parking lot atop the mountain, and it cost only \$3,000 to build.

The roughly 10-by-10-foot plank deck is supported by locust trees Hall cut from the nearby forest. It gives a long view west off Sassafras, with immediate views of Roundtop Mountain, Little Caesar Head Mountain and even Pinnacle Mountain.

It's a million-dollar view for a price tag of a few thousand dollars.